

GLOBAL YOUNG LEADERS IN CAMBODIA: SOWING SEEDS AND EXPORTING HOPE



YLP participants listen intently as farmers in the Trapang Thum village of Takeo province talk about how they are working with CEDAC to improve their livelihoods through organic rice farming. Photo: Amanda Chiu

Standing out in the fields of a local Cambodian village with chickens clucking at their feet, participants of the Global Young Leaders Programme (YLP) listened intently as a farmer describes how he grows the rice which sustains his family. The situation in the rural village of Takeo province in Cambodia is a stark contrast to life at home for this international group of executives participating in The Global Institute For Tomorrow's (GIFT's) Cambodia Rural Agricultural Enterprise Project in Phnom Penh.

Coming from all corners of the world – from India to China and Malaysia to Switzerland and Cameroon – this diverse group representing companies such as PETRONAS, Cathay Pacific and Shanghai Sunny Charcoal Trade Co. Ltd along with leading institutes and business schools, had to rise to the challenge of working together on developing a business plan for an organic rice trading enterprise which would enable rice farmers to adopt a self-reliant income generating approach to growing and marketing their products. By working with GIFT's NGO partner, CEDAC (Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture), the Young Leader's primary objective was to create a viable business plan which had all the necessary components to ensure it can improve the livelihoods of thousands of poor rice farmers in the province.

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This coming together of diverse business minds and “real-world” community development challenges sets GIFT’s programme apart from other leadership initiatives. The programme exposes young leaders to theoretical training on social responsibility, ethics and governance issues before immersing them in a community project where they must work in partnership with locals to develop a sustainable, prosperity-creating opportunity.

In this case the business opportunity is clear. Just two hours away from the rapidly developing city of Phnom Penh, the land harvests some of the best rice in the world. Domestic and global demand for rice, particularly high quality rice, is expanding at 12 to 15 percent annually. It is estimated that there is a premium of 20 to 50 percent to be earned in exports markets where high grade organic rice is popular amongst discerning consumers.

The challenge however, is in harnessing these factors into a viable, profitable business. Poor infrastructure, lack of access to capital and marketing know-how, inefficient management systems and supply chains along with the high cost of rice milling and transport are often barriers to businesses succeeding in Cambodia. Compounding these problems is the fact that many of the uneducated rice farmers lack knowledge about the benefits of producing organic rice or how to obtain the best prices from traders who often exploit them.

This is where the Young Leaders came in. Tasked with the mandate to create a robust business plan, the Young Leaders worked closely with CEDAC’s social enterprise venture, CSE to focus on getting incentives right for farmers so they can move from cultivating rice grown using chemical fertilizers to natural organic rice. It became quickly apparent that they needed to create a viable rice trading enterprise which not only serves the needs of the markets but also the interests of farmers.



Following a site visit, YLP participants gather to discuss findings. The backgrounds of participants are diverse with individuals coming from all parts of the world including Cameroon, USA, India, Brazil, China and Malaysia. Photo: Irene So

The real test for these professionals was whether they could weather uncharted waters and use their business acumen to tackle issues beyond their existing knowledge base. The pace and intensity of the programme meant that the group had to rapidly absorb information and gain local understanding. Heated conversations and debates about rice productivity, efficient rice milling supply chains, and organic certification and exports could be overheard during the bus trips back from project site visits – all thoughts of unread emails and office meetings forgotten.

By the end of the programme, YLP participants experienced a range of emotions and breakthroughs. According to one participant, Irene So, of Senior Citizen Home Safety Association, “the most impressive learning was how to work with twenty team mates to produce a business plan in just 7 days. We had different nationalities, backgrounds, languages, personalities, responses and perceptions. It’s both a real challenge and an art to communicate well and to leverage each other’s core competencies.”

For many YLP participants, it was important to know that their efforts had the possibility of producing a real impact. “I had lots of interaction with farmers in the different villages. I could see that these are the people that would potentially benefit from what I’m doing, which is an absolutely incredible experience for me,” said Ronney Ngan, Change and Development Support Manager of Cathay Pacific.

On the last day of the programme, potential investors were invited to an Investor Conference where participants had the opportunity to present their business plan to potential funders. In attendance were leading multinational agencies and companies such as the Asian Development Bank, the National Bank of Cambodia, the World Bank, UNESCO, GTZ, the Embassy of Japan and several regional garment and consulting companies. The positive feedback received at the conference, particularly an endorsement from the Asian Development Bank, sparked the decision to hold a more focused Investor Conference in the coming months once the business plan is finalised and approved by CEDAC.

While the business plan is only the beginning in making the project a reality, it is clear that participants and community members alike were positively impacted by the experience. In his final reflection at the end of two weeks M. Fasludeen Abdul of PETRONAS concluded that the YLP was a “unique program where I was pushed to my limits in leading a team, managing motivation and walking away a better person.” In enabling leaders to feel they can make a difference, the YLP Phnom Penh was without a doubt a resounding success.

About GIFT

Based in Hong Kong, GIFT is an independent think tank aimed at bringing together technical and commercial expertise with key knowledge on the issues concerning corporate social responsibility and sustainable development, and the influence of the region’s economies. The organisation works with business leaders and government policy makers on the challenges of globalisation and Asia’s development needs to realise the opportunities therein.

Note: If you are interested in the business plan and the opportunity to invest in this unique project, please contact GIFT.

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